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7-1-2002

Records Management for Municipal Governments: A Reference Guide for City Officials and Municipal Public Records Custodians

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Recommended Citation

Huffer, Dennis, "Records Management for Municipal Governments: A Reference Guide for City Officials and Municipal Public Records Custodians" (2002). *MTAS Publications: Full Publications*.
http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_mtaspubs/194

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PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

Records management is often an overlooked issue in both public and private sector offices; however, this task is becoming more vital every day. In this information age, everyone, from the average citizen to the largest corporation or government, must find a way to preserve, manage, store and organize their records. Whether your city has a population of 1,500 or 650,000, it is necessary to keep accurate wage and hour records on employees and have a comprehensive system for tracking documents. Good managers will expend significant time and effort in planning and making decisions about their labor force and their facilities, but few take the time to think about their records. The records of an office are often as essential to its operation as its employees, facilities, and equipment. New employees can be hired and trained to replace those who leave; new office space and equipment can be leased or purchased to replace anything that is lost, even in cases of the worst disasters. If your records are lost or destroyed, however, there is nowhere to go to purchase a replacement, and they often cannot be recreated.

For certain city officials, such as the city recorder, record keeping is one of the most important duties and purposes of the office. For others, such as employees of a police department, record keeping is incidental to the fundamental purpose of the job, which is law enforcement. Nevertheless, these offices still must comply with federal and state statutes that require accurate records regarding the personnel, finances and other aspects of the office. Good records management practices will benefit both types of offices.

REASONS FOR RECORDS MANAGEMENT

Proper records management not only conveys organizational and managerial benefits to an office, but also, for local government offices, it is a vital task, necessary for fulfilling important legal requirements and duties. The following are just a few of the reasons your city should take records management seriously.

Space

In many cities, finding sufficient space for records is a real problem. It is rare for a city department to have all the space it needs. Most local officials would complain that the necessary records of the office are rapidly filling all available space. City halls are overfilled with old and archived records found stuffed in basements, storage closets and attics. For this reason alone, it is important and cost effective for a city to implement a records management program.

Records Serve as a Legal Foundation

In a society of laws, both local governments and the citizens they serve are dependent upon good documentation to demonstrate their legal status. Court orders, tax records, and minutes of city council meetings are just a few examples of important documents that create relationships, establish rights or liabilities, and authorize certain actions. When disputes arise over legal issues, it is important to have good documentation on which to rely. Local governments have an important responsibility to preserve these records. Proper records management will ensure these records are preserved and can be found when needed.

Open Records Requirements

Since government records are generally open to public inspection, the task of managing records becomes even more important and more complicated. The principle of allowing public access to government records, combined with the so-called Sunshine Law, which requires open meetings, is considered an important check on government and an important defense against corruption in public office and mismanagement of public resources. Unless there is a specific statutory exemption that makes a record confidential, the public has the right to inspect and make a copy of the records of government agencies. So not only must you, as a municipal official, preserve and keep records, you must allow public access to these records for inspection. Unless your records are well-organized and well-protected, you may not be able to comply with public requests for information. This can undermine public confidence in government and hinder your city's relationship with the citizens it serves.

Historical Preservation of Documents

Cities play a vital role in preserving our nation's history. The documents and records of local governments give us insights into the lives of our ancestors and the circumstances of their times. Cities with too many records and too little space for them routinely end up placing them wherever they can. In many cases, these storage areas don't adequately protect records from the elements. Heat, moisture, mildew, insects and vermin can quickly render records useless. Your municipality and its citizens may be losing important information as well as a part of the community's heritage. With proper records management, the important records are preserved, the less essential records are destroyed when no longer useful so they do not take up all the available space, the records are catalogued and organized so that officials and the public can access

them, and records are stored under proper conditions to enable long-term preservation.

PURPOSES OF THIS MANUAL

This manual is intended to be a resource to help city officials and other individuals implement a proper records management program in their cities. In this manual you will find a discussion of guidelines for storing records in alternative formats such as microfilm, microfiche and the various electronic and computer storage media, suggestions about contingency planning for disaster recovery and records storage, and general information on records management, as well as a listing of other sources of information on these topics. Although many of these issues are too complex to cover fully in this publication, it is hoped this manual will highlight the issues that should concern city officials and records custodians.

Most of this manual consists of appendices of records retention schedules for the major types of records kept by a city. These schedules describe the records, indicate whether they are permanent or temporary records, and establish the amount of time a temporary record must be kept before it can be destroyed. The Municipal Technical Advisory Service, a unit of the Institute for Public Service of the University of Tennessee, is authorized by law to produce such schedules as a guide to city officials in determining the proper disposition of their records.¹

¹T.C.A. 10-7-702.